DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 561 EA 024 824

TITLE Achieving Excellence through the Middle Level Curriculum.
INSTITUTION National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 30p.; A product of NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education.
AVAILABLE FROM National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091-1537.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Curriculum Design; *Curriculum Development; Individual Differences; Individualized Education Programs; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; *Student Development
IDENTIFIERS *Early Adolescents; *Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

High expectations and appropriate standards for learning and achievement are important to any curriculum plan. The need for curriculum to meet developmental needs is particularly important for middle-level students. Middle-level students are unlike any other age group and are internally varied. Not all middle-level students need the same things at the same time to the same extent. Also, learning success cannot be realistically measured with a single performance assessment. Current middle-level curriculum does not meet the needs of students. And moves toward a national curriculum and testing program threaten to further damage the education of impoverished and minority youth. Systematic, comprehensive curriculum planning that allows individual progress toward desired goals is needed to meet the special needs of middle-level students. Educators must determine how the purposes of elementary, middle level, and high schools differ. Also, should the developmental differences between these students determine curriculum differences? A locally produced mission statement is an important step in middle-level education. Curricula must address increasing cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. Integration of learning is also important. Other concerns in middle-level curriculum development include organization, instructional leadership, adolescent identity needs, and administrator leadership role. (Contains 25 references.) (JPT)

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Achieving Excellence Through the Middle Level Curriculum

NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education

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Achieving Excellence
Through the
Middle Level Curriculum

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Preface

After the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which focused on improving high schools, the NASSP Middle Level Council perceived a need to provide middle level educators with information to improve their schools. Toward that end, the NASSP Middle Level Council developed the Agenda for Excellence series of monographs:

- *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* (1985) focused on concerns specific to effective middle level education.
- *Developing a Mission Statement for the Middle Level School* (1987) detailed procedures for defining the local mission to improve school program effectiveness.
- *Assessing Excellence: A Guide for Studying the Middle Level School* (1988) provided middle level schools with strategies for assessing the critical aspects of local programs.
- *Middle Level Education's Responsibility for Intellectual Development* (1989) examined issues middle level schools face in improving intellectual dimensions of middle level school learning.

This final volume, *Achieving Excellence Through the Middle Level Curriculum*, considers issues related to making middle level curriculum more responsive to the educational needs of young adolescents. It deals particularly with the curriculum implications of *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* (Johnston et al., 1985), the initial monograph in this series.

Our purpose in this volume is to assist administrators and staff in defining their local middle level curriculum agenda and moving it forward.

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We hope the monographs have helped middle level school administrators, staff members, and communities improve the effectiveness of their school programs.

The NASSP Council on Middle Level Education is honored to dedicate this final volume in the Agenda for Excellence series to our friend, colleague, and mentor, John H. Lounsbury. As a member of the NASSP Council on Middle Level Education from 1983 to 1990, John gave major direction to each publication in this series. He retired from the Council in 1990 to devote more time to grandparenting and other delights he and his wife Libby now pursue with vigor.

John's legacy of accomplishments and service to middle level education is a hallmark of true excellence.

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Introduction

High expectations and appropriate standards for learning and achievement are critical to an effective curriculum, whether it be at the elementary, middle, or high school level. However, to support and enhance student learning, identified expectations and standards must be appropriate to the developmental needs of students. Curriculum goals and standards of performance are meaningless if they are beyond the learner's capacities.

Middle level students are unlike any other age group. And even more important, they are more unlike each other than any other age group. Therefore, identifying appropriate outcomes and standards for middle level students presents a unique challenge.

The middle level curriculum must recognize that, although students may be working toward the same outcomes, some will take longer to get there and will need extra support through unique instructional strategies and materials. Those students who meet outcomes more quickly must be allowed the flexibility to move ahead to new challenges.

The notion that "earlier is better" is double-edged. Middle level curricula and school programs must acommodate individual students who are ready for particular learning experiences earlier than their peers. At the same time, we must ensure that similar expectations are not placed on all middle level students—especially those lacking that readiness.

Middle level educational goals and curriculum expectations that are beyond the realities of learner readiness only frustrate and thwart student needs. Earlier is better only for those who are ready earlier and who will thrive on the academic challenge.

As middle level curricula are translated into local school programs, three facts must be recognized:

- All students do not need the same things to the same extent.
- All students do not need the same things at the same time.
- Learning success cannot be realistically measured with a single performance assessment. An appropriate range of measures of performance is needed to accurately assess individual student achievement.

The goal is to help all students progress toward middle level curriculum outcomes. We must replace traditional, standardized measures of assessment that reduce all learning outcomes to a series of multiple choice items with authentic means that assess individual student progress with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Both the form and substance of today's middle level curriculum remain remarkably similar to what existed in schools a half-century ago. However, the world in which today's students live is dramatically different. Current efforts in the United States to move toward a national curriculum may only intensify the fragmented curriculum of the past.

Smith, O'Day, and Cohen (1990) observe "we already are moving toward a de facto national basic skills curriculum—there is no need for a new effort if we simply want more of the same."

The risk that a national curriculum and testing program will further tilt the decline of school achievement among impoverished and minority youth is a serious concern. Unauthentic measurements of assessment and outcome expectations that do not recognize the diverse educational needs of America's youth increase the danger of resegregating particular groups into a permanent American underclass.

Systematic, systemwide curriculum planning is needed to develop curricular alternatives appropriate for middle level students (Beane, Toepfer, and Alessi, 1986). To positively affect student learning, those alternatives must encourage individual progress toward desired curriculum goals. This entails reconcep-

tualizing middle level curriculum functions in terms of the needs of contemporary and emerging society and based on a recognition of the different educational needs of young adolescents.

Meeting the curricular challenges of middle level education will require new elements and a new structure.

A Middle Level Curriculum Focus

What, then, is the nature of curriculum in effective middle level schools? To establish a middle level curriculum identity, educators must answer the following questions:

- How do purposes of elementary, middle level, and high schools differ?
- Do the developmental differences between young adolescents and elementary and high school learners require a curriculum based on those differences?

Beane (1990b) focused attention on the middle level school curriculum question:

> ...if the middle school is to be based upon the characteristics of early adolescence, then the curriculum ought to be redesigned along developmentally appropriate lines rather than simply a slightly revised version of the traditional high school curriculum... Being sensitive to early adolescent characteristics is only part of "reform." The "how to teach" question must be accompanied by a "what do we teach and learn" question.

Some say what is taught in the middle level school is not as important as how it is taught. While organizational features such as interdisciplinary teams, block schedules, advisory programs, and activity programs have responded to young adolescents' educational needs, the substance of the curriculum is as important as its method of delivery.

Efforts to establish a free-standing middle level school identity are ongoing, yet many still regard middle level schools as "easier" versions of high schools. Initially labeled "early secondary education," it was decades before the junior high school defined its purposes as something other than a "junior edition" of high school.

Public and professional understanding of the differences between elementary and middle level and between middle level and high school lags well behind the understanding of the differences between the pedagogic purposes, curriculum, and programs of elementary and high schools.

Middle level curricula must provide bases for developing school programs that respond to the educational needs of all youth. Two statements in the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents report (Hornbeck, 1989) reinforce the critical need to address curriculum at the middle level:

> For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future.
>
> Middle grade schools—junior high, intermediate, and middle schools—are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift.

Certainly, there is no greater challenge to middle level curriculum.

Ownership in Defining the Curriculum

Who should be involved in the "what" of middle level curriculum? The roles are defined for both educators and laypersons.

The educators' primary responsibility should be to design programs; their supporting role should be to set goals. Lay persons should be primarily concerned with defining goals; their supporting role should be in advising about program decisions.

A locally developed and adopted mission statement provides an important base for establishing ownership in defining the middle level curriculum.

In *Developing a Mission Statement for the Middle Level School* (Johnston et al., 1987) the authors describe schools without clear missions as places where policies and rules are contradictory, where "teachers may have conflicting expectations, and students may lack a clear sense of what constitutes appropriate behavior."

Thomson (1987) adds that "Unstructured settings can be devastating to morale as well as productivity. Staff members operating in this limbo crave a clear definition of expectations, orderly planning, adequate coordination, and feedback about performance.

"Furthermore," he says, "a loose organization will create internal coalitions and conspiracies to fill the power vacuum."

When staff members take the lead in developing a mission statement for their school, they establish the frame for defining middle level curriculum. The resultant staff empowerment becomes the initiative for overcoming the vacuum described above.

Defining a middle level curriculum identity is a complex task. As Alexander says (1973), "So many educators know so little about curriculum planning, but keep trying to re-invent the 'curriculum' wheel. These efforts by people poorly informed of the history and practice in the curriculum field really end up only rediscovering the same old ruts in the road."

Leadership in framing the middle school curriculum question requires curriculum expertise. Input by the broad range of middle level professionals, combined with community involvement, can determine the appropriateness of the school curriculum and program.

These groups must agree which areas should be addressed to define the "what" of middle level school curricula and school programs. They must also focus attention on how middle level programs meet the evolving needs of young adolescents in our contemporary society.

Middle level school identity must be based on what learners can do and achieve during their middle level years. Defining and differentiating the substantive nature of middle level curriculum is central to that effort.

Student Diversity and the Curriculum

Middle level curricula must also address the wide range of early adolescent development and the increasing cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of our society.

The ranges of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of middle level students are wide. Thinking levels among middle school students range from beginning concrete operational thinkers to mature abstract thinkers. Reading ranges also vary.

The human relations dimension of middle level programs is vital. It must be imbedded within cognitive and affective dimensions of the curriculum to help students from diverse backgrounds realize both school and future success.

Middle level curricula must include objectives, content, materials, and activities that promote achievement for students from multicultural backgrounds. It must also address the needs of impoverished youth. Clark (1988) observed:

> Traditional sociological and sociopsychological research theories have held that a person is disadvantaged to the degree that he or she can be categorized as belonging to a minority group, a low-income group, or a group with low educational and occupational status, or as living in a community where the crime rate is high, and where the local schools do not provide the mix of resources that are necessary for educational and occupational success.
>
> Similarly, a person could be from an upper-middle class background and have parents who have access

> to huge sums of money and have 'everything going for them' in an external sense, yet suffer from low self-esteem, which restricts the child from enjoying those advantages. That person, too, may be educationally or attitudinally disadvantaged.

The importance of the decisions young people make during early adolescence makes middle level school a critical time. Futures can be affected negatively if the middle level curriculum responds only to cognitive deficiencies without recognizing cultural orientation.

Curriculum Function Issues

Early adolescents learn better when curriculum organization emphasizes integration of learning. The success of organizational features such as interdisciplinary teaming is clear; however, efforts to define the "what" issues of the curriculum remain sluggish.

When young adolescents attempt to learn and understand content and skills that are beyond their ability, they may become frustrated, confused, or resort to strict rote memorization. On the other hand, if the curriculum is not challenging, the student may become bored and develop negative attitudes about learning.

Curriculum should not be developed solely to increase student intelligence. We are reminded by Gesell, Ilg, and Ames (1956) that "A normal 10-year-old with a mental age of 14

does not necessarily act like a 14-year-old; he tends to act more like a 'bright' 10-year-old."

Middle level schools should provide intellectual challenges to youngsters who are ready for advanced challenges. However, students should not be required to use thinking skills they have not yet developed.

A major middle level curriculum goal is to send forth students who have confidence in their ability to learn. Middle level school programs should offer challenges that allow learners to perform successfully at their developmental level.

Preparing students for college and the world of work should not take precedence over meeting general education needs. A general education foundation will become essential as students move into high school where they must make increasingly critical educational decisions.

Several middle level educational functions can help define a middle level curriculum focus (Gruhn and Douglas, 1947):

Exploration

The middle level school's exploratory mission and program should accommodate the physiological, biological, social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of some of the most traumatic changes young people experience. Young adolescents require opportunities to explore their interests, talents, and skills within personal and educational constructs. They must identify who and what they are and consider who and what they want to and can become.

Exploratory programs must focus on two areas:

- First, they must help young adolescents define and pursue their current living and learning needs.
- Second, they must consider how students' developing interests and capacities can influence future school and life decisions. However, this second thrust should not be emphasized to the detriment of the first.

Decisions that focus on later educational considerations without adequate exploration of current personal concerns tend to be unrealistic.

Early adolescents better understand information when they can apply it to their personal circumstances. Therefore, developmental exploration should be a part of the middle level curriculum.

An exploratory focus enables students to better understand their emerging capacities and interests during this time of change.

Socialization

Young adolescents often place their social development needs above all else during these years. As life outside the home takes on greater importance, the school becomes the major structured arena for young adolescent social interaction. Middle level school programs, therefore, must afford students adequate opportunities for social interaction with peers and significant adults. If not, students find their own ways to fulfill those needs, including disrupting the classroom or skipping school.

Differentiation

At the middle level, programs and activities should respond to the wide range of early adolescent development in areas such as reading, thinking, attention, concentration, interests, and physical capabilities. The curriculum should allow for alternative learning arrangements, materials, times, and approaches to classroom management.

Alternative teaching approaches are also necessary to accommodate the wide range of student learning styles.

Integration

Early adolescents need assistance in their transition from the elementary to the middle level school and support as they move through the middle level school program.

Curriculum integration helps students "learn how to learn" and helps them become independent, confident students. It should help students develop the broad knowledge base and the skills needed for learning. Their successful transition to high school depends on how well the middle level school program provides learning activities that are integrated with appropriate skill development needs.

Articulation

Curriculum articulation should minimize gaps and overlap both program and learning expectations as students move from one school unit or program to the next. Thus, middle level programs must be planned in cooperation with the sending elementary schools and the receiving high schools.

Grade level teams must coordinate program content with each other and with teams at lower and higher grade levels. In the absence of teaming, content area enclaves and grade level groups must examine those linkages periodically and reorganize them as necessary.

An Agenda for Excellence (Johnston et al., 1985) suggests establishing transition panels to address articulation needs. A representative group of teachers from the terminal grade at the elementary school and the entry grade at the middle level school should work with parents and principals to address articulation issues. A similar group from the terminal middle level grade and the entry high school grade should work together.

Toward Middle Level Curriculum Excellence

Decisions regarding the roles of content and process in middle school curriculum depend on how schools define the following notion proposed in *An Agenda for Excellence:*

> The curriculum must balance skill development with content coverage, which may be outdated before it is used. To prepare youth for the future, the middle school curriculum must develop intellectual skills and an understanding of humankind that will permit the student to gather information, organize it in a meaningful fashion, evaluate its veracity and utility, form reasonable conclusions about it, and plan for individual and collective action.

Instructional leadership is necessary to define middle level school curriculum issues, including identifying the local K–12 content and its relationship to the articulation issue. Too often, the school's curriculum organization is addressed before the content and skills issues in the districtwide program are fully understood.

Middle level school staff members must be prepared to organize both skill and content dimensions of the curriculum (Toepfer, 1990).

With regard to skills, *An Agenda for Excellence* suggests the middle level school curriculum should equip students with skills for continued learning, including those associated with:

- The collection of information (reading, writing, research)
- The organization, manipulation, and expression of ideas (mathematics, writing, speaking)

- The evaluation of information and ideas, including their competent analysis and critique
- The production of new plans and proposals for action.

With regard to the appropriate use of content, *An Agenda for Excellence* stated that "it is necessary for schools to relate curriculum content to the immediate concerns of the young adolescent and assure its utility outside the classroom."

Learning by doing must become the middle level curricular "set." Learning activities such as field trips and community service projects offer a natural "hook" to develop school experiences that go beyond the traditional lecture-type learning mode, which often stifles the intellectual and social curiosity of young adolescents.

Curriculum Organization Issues

Krug (1957) described curriculum as including "all the means of instruction used by the school to provide opportunities for student experiences leading to desired student outcomes."

Curriculum planning activities range from identifying broad goals to describing possibilities for specific teaching-learning situations. Curriculum development and instruction are elements within the total curriculum planning process.

The principal must be involved in curriculum development activities, especially as they affect operational policies and procedures.

Particular aspects of curriculum practice in day-to-day school operations must be addressed, including means to view curriculum conceptually, identify content elements, describe curriculum processes, and examine curriculum learning outcomes. The following classifications address dimensions of the curriculum process (Beane, Toepfer, and Alessi, 1986):

1. *Curriculum as product* refers to documents such as course lists, course syllibi, course outlines, curriculum guides, and lists of skills. They are formulated from curriculum planning or curriculum development activities.

   Curriculum as product is useful in developing materials that are based on state and local requirements. This dimension helps codify curriculum into local program guides, course outlines, and the like.

2. *Curriculum as program* is curriculum as product translated into the day-to-day school learning activities. It is the vehicle for carrying out the school's learning purposes.

   Curriculum as program provides the focus for local staff organizing programs that can be delivered in the school-community. It is how middle level school personnel create programs that respond to local realities and needs.

3. *Curriculum as intended learnings* seeks to base school programs in concepts or ideas rather than as products. It can also define curriculum in a more manageable way by limiting its scope.

   Defining the "what" of curriculum requires goals and objectives that specify the purposes—intended learnings—of middle level school programs. Principals need to work with staff members to define the curriculum as intended learnings. In doing this, they can identify learning outcomes that the middle level school should pursue.

4. *Curriculum as the experience of the learner* represents a major departure from the previous three categories. Here, curriculum refers to those experiences of learners that are outcomes of planned learning programs and activities.

   The course of actual events developed from curriculum as product, program, and intended learning resides in the learnings that students take away from the various experiences provided by the middle level school.

   Curriculum as the experience of the learner focuses primarily on the learner rather than on teaching itself. Most frequently used in exploratory and elective courses, this dimension should be integrated into required areas of the curriculum program.

These four classifications can help focus and organize particular aspects of middle level curricula. In that regard, the "what" dimension of the middle level curriculum may reside in the combination of curriculum process and content.

The "what" issues of curriculum process(es) for planning and organizing appropriate middle level curricula may be more unique than curriculum content area issues themselves.

Middle Level Curriculum Identity

Middle level education needs a curriculum identity as specific as those of elementary and high school education. That identity must be based on the diversity of young adolescent characteristics and needs, and on the desired functions of the middle level curriculum.

Middle level education's identity must be based on what learners can do and achieve as they pass through their middle level school years. It should also reflect the idea that the middle level school is not a "junior edition" of the high school.

Beane (1990c) suggests that "the center of the curriculum (should) consist of thematic units whose organizing centers are drawn from the intersecting concerns of early adolescents and issues in the larger world." He also suggests that the middle level school be a "general education school with a coherent, unified, and complete curriculum."

The separation of middle level curricula into academic, exploratory, elective, and advanced level categories has hindered efforts to integrate learning across the curriculum.

Teaming and other integrating features can help re-establish the proper order of function and form that currently impede effective curriculum organization.

The middle level curriculum must interweave academic and non-academic concerns. Teachers from all content and skill backgrounds must be freed from the limiting mindset of preconceived, artificial separations of information and skill areas to pursue their professional responsibilities of planning and facilitating effective learning.

Curriculum for Early Adolescent Identity

Middle level education should meet young adolescents' need to identify with serious issues in the contemporary world and to find direction in considering those issues. To do that, the curriculum must include activities that help students learn about real life issues at developmentally appropriate levels.

Instruction can focus on issues in the students' school and community in such areas as day care; care for the elderly and/or disabled; and issues associated with the environment, recreation, transportation, and communication. Emphasis should be placed on teaching the processes, skills, concepts, and information students need to pursue projects in these areas.

Some student projects might include:

- Help out in a day care center or with younger students in the local elementary school
- Volunteer at a nursing home or rehabilitation center
- Become involved in recycling activities
- Help local government and community agencies conduct telephone surveys
- Participate in information-gathering activities for local media
- Study traffic patterns to help determine local transportation problems and needs.

With proper guidance, young adolescents can plan, implement, and evaluate these projects. The satisfaction of working with "real-life" issues that affect their lives helps young adolescents develop a sense of belonging in their community. This participation also enhances students' sense of responsibility.

Organizing these projects into short-term activities helps ensure completion of the projects (given young adolescents' short attention spans). Evaluation of student performance on these activities can help determine the students' readiness to move on to the next step and, ultimately, on to more advanced projects.

Again, the concept of exploration is imbedded in such activities. The experience gained from studying and working on real issues helps students bridge the gap between school learning and community/societal needs.

Elective courses organized as internships or contract learning arrangements in specific areas of student interest can provide follow-up or advanced opportunities for students with continuing interests.

Promoting such learning experiences requires middle level educators to address the three concerns discussed previously:

- First, we must overcome the artificial divisions into which middle level curriculum has been traditionally organized
- Second, as Beane (1990b) suggested, teachers from various content areas must be repositioned together to facilitate thematic study
- Third, middle level schools must be organized so groups of students and teachers can work together beyond a single school year.

Instruction in important facts, concepts, and skills can be organized within a series of themes and issues that reflect early adolescent identity needs.

Middle Level School Leadership Tasks

Administrators must take the leadership role in identifying middle level curriculum issues in their schools. No long-term middle level instructional leadership issue is more important today.

Administrators and staff members must work together to identify at least one curriculum issue on which they can act as soon as possible. This helps focus staff interest on that issue, encourages involvement and support, and develops a sense of accomplishment.

Board of education members and parent and community groups should also be involved in addressing curriculum concerns. Holding informational meetings to communicate the importance of these issues in terms of local needs and concerns is also recommended. Educators should also network with educators in other area middle level schools to increase their recognition of curriculum issues.

On a broader scale, interaction with regional and state education associations will extend the visibility of these curriculum issues and can result in additional support. The issues should also be addressed in professional publications and at state and regional conferences and workshops.

School personnel should be encouraged to visit schools where effective curriculum practices can be seen in action.

Taking a leadership role in dealing with middle level curriculum concerns requires taking risks in an effort to gain recognition of the need for a free-standing middle level curriculum identity. To do this, principals must develop lobbying skills to gain institutional recognition of the need for middle level schools to develop responsive school programs.

Conclusion

Middle level educators must break away from the idea that middle level education programs should concentrate on preparing students for high school by providing programs that modify high school content and procedures. Curriculum for early adolescents must include programs that focus on the current learning needs of students.

Middle level school programs must also promote life-long learning among students by providing appropriate educational expectations and options. In examining middle level education's responsibility to deal with the intellectual development needs of students, (Toepfer et al., 1989) recommended:

> Instead of trying to force the masses of early adolescents to higher-level thinking, ready or not, perhaps we should help each student become the best thinker she or he can be at the rate and pace that her or his capacities and developmental readiness will allow. Such an approach will help ensure a better attitude toward learning and prepare youth for a long-term learning effort that extends far beyond the middle grades.

To excite and stimulate students toward continued learning, middle level curricula must be based on what individual learners can do, instead of what they cannot do. A major curriculum goal of middle level schools is to send the largest possible number of students on to high school with realistic chances for continued success in learning. This requires curricula that provide opportunities for young adolescents to learn as fast as they can, or as slow as they must.

In turn, high school curricula have the responsibility to provide means for developing programs that allow students to continue to progress at paces that do not violate the integrity of their individual readiness. There is no other way.

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